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For the third time in five months, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara was in South Viet Nam to see what should—or could—be done about that frustrating, dragging war. This trip was the result of a new and disturbing series of events—the second coup in Saigon; De Gaulle's "neutralist" lures; terrorism by the Communist Viet Cong against Americans; the inability so far of South Viet Nam's latest strongman, 36-year-old General Nguyen Khanh, to get the government on the offensive.

The scene that awaited McNamara, therefore, was about as grim as ever. Four more U.S. advisers died during the week, raising the death toll of Americans in Viet Nam to 194. In an ominous admission of the breadth of Viet Cong influence, the Saigon regime pronounced 35 of the country's 42 provinces "unhealthy zones." With the military undergoing its umpteenth reshuffle, the 7th Division, south of Saigon, got its fifth commander in five months. A widely advertised "pacification" drive in the area was at a standstill. Only two months of the dry season—the best time for chasing guerrillas—remained, and Mekong Delta peasants allowed that the rains would come early this year.

The omens were not the best. Last week a Viet Cong battalion ambushed two government paratrooper units one mile from the Cambodian frontier, then fled, as the Reds have so often done in the past, into the adjacent kingdom.

Vietnamese-piloted planes pursued them to the border, killed an estimated 40 Reds with flaming napalm. But the troops had no U.S. helicopter support. Reason: to avoid the slightest chance of intruding on Cambodia's territory, American pilots are under orders not to fly within three miles of the border in areas where it is unmarked.

For the Johnson Administration, of which McNamara was earnest emissary, the question now arose whether to implement one or more of Washington's many plans to carry the Vietnamese war up into Ho Chi Minh's North Viet Nam. With November elections in the offing, Lyndon Johnson no doubt wanted to improve the U.S. position in Viet Nam. The nagging question was: How?

In any case, McNamara made clear on arrival in Saigon that the U.S. has no intention of pulling out—as some of its allies seem to think it should. To a crowd of 2,000 that welcomed him at the airport, cheering and waving tiny American flags, he announced: "There is no question of the United States' abandoning Viet Nam. We shall stay for as long as it takes."